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Was Soviet Music Middlebrow? Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, socialist realism and the mass listener in the 1930s

PAULINE FAIRCLOUGH, University of Bristol, UK

It is an oddity of Soviet music history that its greatest achievements remain the most difficult to categorise. We can confidently point to an example of blandly second-rate symphonic writing and declare it socialist realist; but what should we say about a work that we admire? Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony is the obvious example of this conundrum: it is regularly performed all over the world and its quality is not questioned; yet it was famously the composer's "rehabilitation piece" after the high-profile attacks on his opera *Lady Macbeth* in January 1936 and the arts-wide repression that ensued. If the symphony secured that rehabilitation, in the darkest years of Stalin's Terror, then surely it belongs in the category of conformist art, safely socialist realist, definitely "Soviet" in style and spirit, and therefore a work which audiences outside the Soviet Union would be right to approach with extreme caution? Back in 1939 and in the early years of the Cold War, that is precisely how some very influential figures did hear it, most notably Igor Stravinsky and Nicolas Nabokov; Stravinsky famously lampooned it as the "symphony of socialism", while Nabokov deemed it "banal" and "trite".¹

But for the vast majority of listeners the world over, this is not how the Fifth Symphony has been received, either beyond Soviet borders in its own time, nor after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It is, however, a work whose reception history is richly steeped in the lore of the Terror years and of the Cold War in general. Its slow movement was reported to have brought the audience at its Leningrad premiere to tears, and at the same concert, the finale – with its famous protracted D major apotheosis – won the composer such a passionate reception that Shostakovich's friends feared the riotous show of support might rebound upon the vulnerable composer.² Outside Russia, the symphony was performed world-wide, even if it did not achieve global popularity until after Stalin's death; in Britain, at least, there was a perceptible spike in its popularity following the publication in 1979 of Solomon Volkov's purported memoir of Shostakovich, *Testimony*.³ In its pages, readers

For the original impetus to write this article, I am grateful to Kate Guthrie and Christopher Chowrimootoo for inviting me to take part in their conference *Music and the Middlebrow*, University of Notre Dame Global Gateway, London, June 2017. I also wish to thank generous friends and colleagues for their comments on earlier versions of this article: Philip Bullock, Marina Frolova-Walker, Kate Guthrie, Sarah Hibberd, John Pickard, Florian Scheduling and Richard Taruskin.

¹ For the Stravinsky, see *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons*, trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970, 153-55. For the Nabokov, see Ian Wellens, *Music on the Frontline: Nicolas Nabokov's Struggle against Communist and Middlebrow Culture*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2002, 103.

² See Isaak Glikman, *Story of a Friendship: the letters of Dmitry Shostakovich to Isaak Glikman with a commentary by Isaak Glikman*, trans. Anthony Phillips, London: Faber and Faber, 2002, xxiv. See also Manashir Yakubov, "The Fifth Symphony. The story of how it was composed and its first performances", Shostakovich, Symphony No. 5, Moscow: DSCH Publishers, 2004, 170-73.

³ For details, see Pauline Fairclough, "The 'Old Shostakovich': reception in the British press", *Music and Letters* 88 no. 2 (2007), 266-96.

found the perfect Cold War description of the overblown finale coda, designed and guaranteed to give Western audiences a way of understanding this music: “it’s as though someone were beating you with a stick, saying ‘your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing’ and you rise up, shakily and go on your way, muttering ‘our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing’. What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that.”⁴

It is not surprising that this way of hearing the ending has become the norm, since pre-concert talks, program notes and accounts of the work frequently quote Volkov or reference his interpretation. Yet it is a reading that defies historical logic. For we cannot credibly assert that socialist realism was required from Soviet composers during this period, state or imply that this socialist realist music is in some way substandard or compromised, and then laud the most successful symphonic work of the entire Stalin era (perhaps saving only Shostakovich’s Seventh). If only a “complete oaf” would not hear the alleged dissidence of the finale’s coda, then the symphony’s success in its own time makes no sense. The Volkov reading places a decorous fig leaf over the naked logical flaw, claiming that its success was due to Shostakovich’s cleverness in pleasing both “the authorities” and his more astute listeners. It could, so this reading goes, therefore be in some way both socialist realist and anti-socialist realist; both pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet, conformist and non-conformist, or even dissident.

But even if we reject Volkov’s posturing, as all contemporary scholarship now does, there is still a veil of discreet silence over whether or not what Marina Frolova-Walker has termed the “glib, the bland and the corny” qualities of socialist realism can be applied to Shostakovich’s Fifth. In her seminal article on this subject, Frolova-Walker maintains that socialist realism was a recognizable style, created in conscious opposition to modernism during the 1930s, but is careful only to apply the designation to lower-status works like Myaskovsky’s Twelfth and Sixteenth Symphonies, Yury Shaporin’s opera *The Decembrists* and Shostakovich’s Dolmatovsky Romances.⁵ And this is not surprising at all, given her argument that a major defining quality of socialist realism was blandness. Higher-quality works of the Stalin era are still left in a position of critical limbo; for if we say that they were all socialist realist, we seem to be putting Shostakovich and Prokofiev in the “bland” corner, along with Myaskovsky, Shaporin and other “second division” Soviet composers. If we say that only the weaker music was socialist realist, though, then we have the problem of how to explain the far greater success of the best music, not just in the non-Soviet musical world, but in its own time, among the very audiences for whom it was composed. The aim of this article is to subject our continued use of the term socialist realism to scrutiny, and to consider how we might more profitably look back at this extraordinary body of music, composed during the Stalin regime by a mixture of composers, some of whom, like Shostakovich, were world-class, some of whom we might (as suggested above) categorise as

⁴ Solomon Volkov, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich as Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov*, New York: Harper and Row, 1979 and London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981, 140.

⁵ Marina Frolova-Walker, “The Glib, the Bland and the Corny: An Aesthetic of Socialist Realism” in Roberto Illiano, Massimiliano Sala, eds., *Music and Dictatorship in Europe and Latin America*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2009, 403-23.

respectable second or third division, and some of whom were very weak indeed. In doing so, I will begin by asking a basic question: was Soviet music – specifically, that composed within the date-range for Stalinist socialist realism (1934-53) - middlebrow?

Although using this Anglophone term may seem anachronistic, within Slavic studies, “middlebrow” has long been invoked in relation to Stalin-era literature and music, specifically that which we would generally identify as socialist realist. The first scholar to do so was Vera Dunham, in her survey of Soviet post-war fiction *In Stalin's Time*, first published in 1976 and re-issued in a revised form right at the end of the Soviet era, in 1990.⁶ Another is Evgeny Dobrenko, whose work on the collating of reader-responses in the 1920s and 1930s was originally published in an article entitled “Disaster of Middlebrow Taste; Or, Who Invented Socialist Realism?”⁷ The “Middlebrow” of his title was changed to “Mediocre” for the relevant chapter of his book *The Making of the State Reader*. The equation implied in the change between both “mediocre” and “middlebrow” resonates sympathetically with the title of Frolova-Walker’s chapter mentioned above on the musical phenomenon of socialist realism, entitled “The Glib, the Bland and the Corny: An Aesthetic of Socialist Realism”. Frolova-Walker does not use the term “middlebrow”, but she does echo Dobrenko’s literary findings in the musical sphere, arguing that the essential defining quality of socialist realist music was its inoffensive, unremarkable tone (Dobrenko uses the term “grayness” to describe the same thing). Thus, for Dobrenko, “middlebrow” was synonymous with the socialist realist “grayness” he identifies. With two major Soviet cultural scholars claiming to define socialist realism as bland, or gray, the point would seem to be settled: socialist realism means art that is substandard, and so (for Dobrenko, at least) does the term “middlebrow”. Where Shostakovich is concerned, this does not get us very far: we still have to account for outstanding artworks within this historical paradigm, as well as for those which manifestly have no connection with socialist realist doctrines, such as chamber music and song. But another scholar, the cultural historian Stephen Lovell, provides a different way of defining the middlebrow in a Soviet context:

In early Soviet Russia...culture was issued with an imperative to be both “legitimate” and “popular”, and as a result became “middlebrow”. There was no “high” culture that corresponded to a dominant social class, nor can we really speak of a “popular” culture; there emerged a single “Culture”, which was not allowed to reflect diverse social interests, but rather provided the model for the Marxist-Leninist project of social unification.⁸

⁶ Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time. Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*. Enlarged and updated edition, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990.

⁷ Evgeny Dobrenko, “Disaster of Middlebrow Taste, Or, Who ‘Invented’ Socialist Realism?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* vol. 94/3 (1995), reprinted in Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko, *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997, 135-64. A revised version of this article appeared in Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: social and aesthetic contexts of the reception of Soviet literature* (transl. Jesse M. Savage), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, 82-145.

⁸ Stephen Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution: Print Culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000, 17.

This gives us a less value-laden starting-point, since it simply states that, once the avant-garde (“high”) and popular (“low”) strands of culture had been stripped away, what was left was by definition “middle”. As will be seen, there are problems with this hypothesis, especially when applied to music, but as a starting-point, Lovell’s claim gives us a basis for assuming that Soviet culture, whether we label it socialist realist or not, was by definition middlebrow because of the imperative to be widely accessible.

Middlebrow as mediation

I would like to offer a different insight into what middlebrow might mean in musical terms. The insight is not my own, but that of Richard Taruskin, whose keynote address at the musicology conference in 2017 “Music and the Middlebrow” advanced the idea, following Russell Lynes, that “middlebrow” was not so much a label to be applied to this or that piece of music, as a term of mediation – an ephemeral identity placed upon an artefact in the process of transaction between one socio-economic class and another (Lynes identifies subdivisions of the “middle class” into the socially mobile categories of lower and upper, with cultural mediation a crucial link to such mobility).⁹ Regarding “middlebrow” as a mediating term immediately resonates with the Soviet context because, despite apparently doing away with the middle class or bourgeoisie – and despite not officially having low or high culture, at least not as a fixed, acknowledged entity – Soviet society under both Lenin and Stalin up to 1941 took the notion of cultural participation very seriously indeed.¹⁰

As is well known, the revolution in 1917 precipitated a mass exodus of the aristocracy and cultural elite, and even of those musicians who initially stayed, some of the most important and influential departed within a few years. Those who were left were tasked with preserving Russian musical culture for the benefit of the new mass audience – an audience consisting of a mixture of the old listeners, students, professionals (teachers, doctors, engineers and so on) but now also the urban proletariat, a huge and ever-growing class of people for whom attending concerts of art music was, by and large, a novel experience. The Bolshevik regime stripped away all the mechanisms of commercialized cultural production: private sponsorship, publishing, private ownership of institutions, advertising or any form of marketing not controlled by the State. Yet it still needed the old middle class to deliver culture to the proletariat, and right from the start appointed key figures in the music world to work with State organizations to re-launch the work of orchestras, opera and ballet companies. As the historian Michael David-Fox has explained, the middle class (or, as they

⁹ See Russell Lynes, “Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow” in *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 1/1 (1976), 146-158. Original year of publication was 1949. The conference was “Music and the Middlebrow”, University of Notre Dame Global Gateway, London, June 2017.

¹⁰ The Soviet historian David Hoffmann states that “According to official ideology, only three classes remained in Soviet society: the peasantry, the proletariat, and the intelligentsia.” David Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: the cultural norms of Soviet modernity (1917-1941)*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003, 148. For recent scholarship on music and the middlebrow, see ‘Modernism and its Others, especially the contribution by Christopher Chowrimootoo, ‘Reviving the Middlebrow, or: Deconstructing Modernism from the Inside’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 139:1,187-193.

were more properly called, the Soviet intelligentsia) and the state worked in tandem “to attain modernity through culture and enlightenment”.¹¹ Crucially for our discussion of middlebrow, their joint mission was now untainted by the market-driven norms that so offended crusaders of elite culture in Western Europe and the United States such as Theodor Adorno, José Ortega y Gasset, Clement Greenberg and Virginia Woolf.¹² The key arguments that underpinned Adorno’s critique of cultural consumption in his *Philosophy of Modern Music* – essentially, that the working man was being fed a diet of “bread and circuses” in the guise of a too-easily-accessible high culture in order to keep him supine, complacent and easy to exploit – fall away in this new structure, as David-Fox explains:

An internally focused civilizing mission became such a central feature of modern Russian and Soviet politics and culture because the oppositional intelligentsia’s radical embrace of the masses was accompanied by the great, seemingly urgent task of transforming them. At the birth of mass culture in the nineteenth century, this powerful drive was motivated by a strikingly broad consensus about the pernicious effects of commercialism – and, all the while, shaped by the ubiquitous comparison with the West. The intelligentsia’s enlightenment crusade may have attempted to harness the deep-rooted traditions of autocratic state power, but under the old regime it was unable fully to do so; only with the Bolshevik Revolution, whose leaders derived from the radical wing of the intelligentsia, was the antimarket enlightenment prosecuted with the full force of the revolutionary dictatorship.¹³

This gives us a fascinating alternative vision to that propounded by Adorno: its very starting-point was strikingly close to his own Marxist position, yet by forcing revolution on an entire Empire, the Bolsheviks could claim to be sweeping aside the whole capitalist model, in which culture played such an apparently tainted role, and moving straight on to what Adorno himself had supposedly most urgently desired: the “enlightenment” and liberation (in whatever form) of the individual citizen.

Although the task of enlightening, or “transforming” citizens became increasingly coercive and less about individual freedom (in reality, that was never a Bolshevik goal), David-Fox’s “intelligentsia-statist” model holds up exceptionally well in the musical sphere. This is because with music, the process of mass enlightenment was less ideological than it could ever have been in literature, drama or other texted art-forms. For the most part (the proletarian militancy of the late 1920s and early 30s excepted), the entire transaction between the musical intelligentsia and the proletariat was predicated on cultural sharing, in

¹¹ Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders. Modernity, Ideology and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015, 48.

¹² Key texts representing positions taken by all of these authors include: Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, transl. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley Blomster, London: Sheed & Ward, 1987, José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1993, Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” *Partisan Review* 6/5 (1939), 34-49 and Woolf’s essay “Middlebrow” in *The Death of the Moth*, London: Hogarth Press, 1942.

¹³ David-Fox, *Crossing Borders*, p. 49.

a sense that was less ideological than a middlebrow presentation of art – the intelligentsia did not condescend, or retreat into obscurity (which would in any case have been professional suicide for musicians), but rather it shared what it believed to be valuable. The marketing of past art music and its composers in ways that were supposed to persuade the proletariat of its significance and relevance played a crucial role in this engagement.¹⁴ It was an engagement that came with remarkably few strings attached – money was, though not irrelevant, not quite such an important part of the transaction as it was in capitalist economies, because tickets were heavily subsidized and “mass work” was obligatory for the big institutions like the Leningrad and Moscow Philharmonias. Nor was political instruction really a part of the package either (though workers were certainly instructed in other spheres); a worker attending a club choir or orchestra rehearsal, or listening to a Philharmonia concert, was not required to give anything back, to show knowledge or even enjoyment. Provided they were lucky enough to work in a well-provided factory, with good access to instruments and performance space (which many were not), workers could take advantage of a multitude of cultural opportunities, whether that be learning to play an instrument, taking part in an operatic production, hearing good art music well played, perhaps for the first time, or simply singing in a choir in the factory music club. A vast apparatus of musical experience and opportunity was laid on for the proletariat at State expense, in the sincerely-held belief that this was an essential component of building socialism and fostering good citizenship. In short, this particular aspect of the Soviet experiment provided cultural largesse on a scale that left-wing educationalists and reformers in Europe and North America could only dream of.¹⁵

That is not to say, of course, that there was no trade-off implied in this transaction, either before 1917 or after it. Part of the drive to inculcate good taste in the Russian working population before the revolution was bound up with a lofty disdain for “mass” culture, which might distract the peasant or worker from worthier cultural pursuits. The literary Slavists Steve Smith and Catriona Kelly describe this classically patriarchal instinct in the late nineteenth century: “To Russian intellectuals, the emergence of cultural forms created to make a profit was seen not only to undermine the higher aesthetic and moral purposes of elite culture, but also to threaten pristine, authentic *narodnost*’ [the quality of being “of the people”], folk culture.”¹⁶ And as David-Fox argues, in pre-revolutionary Russia, “well before commercial mass culture, itself closely associated with the West, became widely disseminated toward the end of the nineteenth century... a group defined by the mission of bringing together enlightenment to the masses was already in place.... The result was a

¹⁴ See Pauline Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity Under Lenin and Stalin*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016.

¹⁵ See John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York: Minton, Balch and Co., 1934. See also Dewey, *John Dewey’s Impressions of Soviet Russia and the revolutionary world Mexico-China-Turkey 1929*, with Introduction by William W. Brickman, Columbia: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College Columbia University, 1964.

¹⁶ Catriona Kelly and Steve Smith, “Commercial Culture and Consumerism” in Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd, eds., *Constructing Russian culture in the age of revolution, 1881-1940*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, 113.

veritable crusade to ‘acculturate the popular classes into the national, ‘high’ culture, and to extirpate backwardness, ignorance, and dissoluteness.’”¹⁷

Funders of the old Russian pre-1917 cultural centers of education – the so-called People’s Houses - were motivated by a dual wish to both ensure the productivity of their workforce, but also to improve the lives of the Russian working classes. The historian Gleb Tsipursky has noted that educationalists in Russia, the United States and Britain wished to share their “middle-class cultural values and engage in ‘rational’ and ‘modern’, not ‘traditional’ or commercial, leisure.”¹⁸ And so what began as classic projects in the old model of *noblesse oblige* before 1917 swiftly became a major plank in the Bolsheviks’ mass education programme.¹⁹ After the first major Stalin-era drive for industrialising the Soviet Union and exponentially increasing productivity, such educational clubs received much more State largesse. By the end of the First Five Year Plan (1931), the Bolsheviks had established 912 urban clubs; in just five more years between 1932-37, they founded a further 2,951.²⁰

In creating a cultured workforce, though, the Bolsheviks were not only gaining improved productivity; they gained control over the self-education process itself. The ideal Soviet citizen had to be more than just a productive worker; their very selves had to be correctly shaped. In other words, as David Hoffmann put it: “The New Soviet Person was to be not only clean, sober, and efficient but also prepared to sacrifice his or her individual interests for the good of the collective, in sharp contrast to the ideal of liberal individualism.”²¹ By fostering this “illiberal subjectivity”, the State took the very notion of individual self-improvement and turned it into a civic requirement:

Soviet officials’ efforts to regulate people’s free time stemmed in part from their desire to guarantee or even augment workers’ ability to work well. By preventing drunken or decadent leisure activities, they could ensure workers’ health and physical capacity....the campaign for cultured leisure once again reflected Soviet leaders’ aesthetic vision of what socialist society should look like. Healthy and edifying entertainments fitted their vision of a progressive and enlightened society, where all aspects of life, including leisure, were rationalized, orderly, and harmonious.²²

The term generally used for denoting this vision of personal attainment was *kul’turnost’*: essentially, the quality of being an educated, polite and civilized Soviet citizen. It does have

¹⁷ David-Fox, *Crossing Borders*, 55. The quotation is taken from the chapter cited above by Steve Smith and Catriona Kelly.

¹⁸ Gleb Tsipursky, *Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption and State-Sponsored Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1945-1970*. Pittsburgh, PA: Univ. Pittsburgh Press, 2016, 18.

¹⁹ For an excellent account of the People’s Houses and mass education after 1917, see Adele Lindenmeyr, ‘Building Civil Society One Brick at a Time’ in *Journal of Modern History* 84 no. 1 (March 2012), 1-39.

²⁰ Tsipursky, *Socialist Fun*, 21.

²¹ David Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: the cultural norms of Soviet modernity (1917-1941)* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003, 10.

²² *Ibid.*, 31.

parallels with the aspirations of the middlebrow consumer of culture, as recorded memorably by Janice Radway in her study of the *Book of the Month Club* in the United States, but it differs in one crucial aspect.²³ The Western notion of the middlebrow was bound up with consuming art, whether for pleasure, instruction, self-improvement, or demonstration of culture. All these reasons for consumption were open to ridicule by those who regarded themselves as “highbrow”, as the educated elite, particularly in Britain, struggled to come to terms with mass literacy and the new media of tabloids and radio.²⁴ The closing of ranks in some Anglo-American “highbrow” circles at the prospect of all this unseemly sharing in the 1930s, 1940s and beyond resulted in some remarkable rhetoric – with educationalists and proselytisers of art deemed guilty of besmirching the elite inheritance with their reprehensible urges to spread the Word of culture.²⁵ Even in pre-Soviet Russian society, such attitudes would have been very rare, even unheard of; post-1917 the amount of social and ideological space in which such rampant snobbery could have found house-room was precisely zero. Thus the entire context for the concept of both cultural sharing and, indeed, stylistic accessibility, was radically different in Russia from that in the United States and Britain in the same period of 20th-century history.

In the Soviet context, art was not “consumed” quite as it was in Anglo-American culture – what was available was selected, marketed and delivered within a framework that was largely beholden to the prevailing ideological climate – and the social capital a citizen might acquire through their knowledge of art was of dubious worth, since no matter how dearly anyone loved Beethoven and Shakespeare, that knowledge and experience would not improve their status anything like to the same degree as would Party membership, high work productivity, or other approved political activity. Nonetheless, the Soviet citizen could and did choose how to spend their leisure time; they spent their own rubles on what was available to them, whether that be books, concerts or otherwise, and so, despite the infrastructure of state citizenship and *kul'turnost'* dominating cultural experience, the Soviet citizen was indeed, albeit in a more restricted sense, a consumer of culture, and the element of class-consciousness in that process was by no means as absent in practice as in theory. As Stephen Lovell notes, “By the 1960s... *intelligentnost'* had taken over from *gramotnost'* (literacy) and *obrazovannost'* (educatedness) as the culmination of the “civilizing process”

²³ Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

²⁴ For a vivid account of the travails of Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster and other British writers of the period, see John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: pride and prejudice among the literary intelligentsia 1880-1939*, London: Faber and Faber, 1992. For a more heartening account of the transformative impact of education on Britain's working classes, see Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001.

²⁵ See the comments by Hannah Arendt, expounding on the enemy of culture as the “special kind of intellectual, often well-read and well-informed, whose sole function is to organize, disseminate and change cultural objects in order to make them palatable to those who want to be entertained or—and this is worse—to be ‘educated,’ that is, to acquire as cheaply as possible some kind of cultural knowledge to improve their social status.” Quoted in Ian Wellens, *Music on the Frontline*, 101. I thank Richard Taruskin for this reference. For the classic text attacking middlebrow aspiration, see Dwight MacDonald, *Masscult and Midcult. Essays against the American grain*, New York: New York Review of Books, 2011.

for the urban “middle strata”.²⁶ There is a perceptible element of social striving in this Soviet experience, regardless of what we might imagine would be pride in being working-class. For the historian Sheila Fitzpatrick, the distinction between *kul'tura* and *kul'turnost'* lay precisely in this aspirational quality: “*Kul'tura* was something that one naturally possessed; *kul'turnost'* was something that one purposefully acquired. A sense of becoming, striving, and taking possession was associated with *kul'turnost'*; it was the attribute of one who had recognized that *kul'tura* was a scarce and essential commodity and set out to get some.”²⁷ The means of access to and distribution of art differed in the Soviet Union from that in Britain and the United States, but at heart the acquisition of “culture” was not such a different matter for the Soviet citizen as it was for their North American or British counterparts. All that was really different is that any suspicion of gaining “culture” for social advancement or material benefit (for instance, in terms of promotion prospects, impressing a future spouse or their family, gaining access to elite and wealthy social circles), that might be invoked by a self-appointed “highbrow” seeking to justify their disapproval of cultural sharing, is entirely wiped off the table as a motivating factor.

Cultivating kul'turnost'

It is easy to understand the importance of basic literacy to the Stalinist regime. Propaganda was, after all, a major tool of the whole Soviet era. But why was it important for workers to appreciate music? To answer this question we need to unpack the notion of what being a cultured, modern Soviet citizen meant in the 1930s: to be *kul'turniy* was to be many things, but what it was manifestly not was to be a typical revolutionary of the 1920s: aggressively flouting norms of “proper” social behaviour, showing disdain for bourgeois values, material possessions, constructions of femininity, domesticity and so forth. In her survey of “middlebrow” Soviet fiction, Vera Dunham sets this shift out as a process of “embourgeoisement” of the Soviet system, starting in the 1930s and continuing in the post-war period, noting that Soviet literature of those years captured these changing values, from the way women dress, to the way citizens should aspire to decorate their living spaces, to the way that material privilege itself was perceived. However, she does take care to label these new Stalinist material values as quintessentially *meshchanstvo* – a word that, in the Soviet context, came to denote above all vulgarity and pretentiousness. In a distinctly Woolfian vein, Dunham states that “*Meshchanstvo*’s natural and historical antagonist is the intelligentsia” – both terms transcend Soviet social class but one has a negative meaning, while the other is positive. Her position is, however, a Soviet-era one; Dunham’s idea of *meshchanstvo* is infused with distaste for the existing inequality in late Soviet society (the book was first published in 1976, but reissued with new material in 1990). Thus the “middlebrow” of her title is, in fact, a thoroughly derogatory term, derived wholly from the

²⁶ Stephen Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution: print culture in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 2000, 18.

²⁷ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 218. For this use of *kul'turnost'*, see also Philip Ross Bullock, ‘The Pushkin Anniversary of 1937 and Russian Art Song in the Soviet Union’, *Slavonica*, 13 (2007), 39-56.

Anglophone context, and is aimed squarely at the Soviet *nomenklatura* – the privileged elite whom less materially fortunate (though quite possibly far more intelligent and deserving) Soviet citizens were being brainwashed into admiring through the literature Dunham was surveying. Out go the "real" socialist values; in come those of the grasping, aspirational *meshchanin*.

We need to approach both the concepts of *meshchanstvo* and *kul'turnost'* – which Dunham also invokes – with caution. Because we cannot justify a sneering attitude towards the modest aspirations of impoverished – whether materially, educationally, or both – citizens of the Stalin era. Nor, I would argue, should we turn this disapprovingly highbrow outlook on the whole project to bring art music "to the masses", as the slogan of those years was expressed. On the one hand, there was the 1930s shift from revolutionary iconoclasm to an embrace of certain social behaviours and attitudes that could indeed be termed "bourgeois". This encompassed a whole spectrum of values ranging from how the institutions of family life should be understood to how to regard Pushkin and Tchaikovsky. To quote Hoffmann again, comparing the 1920s to the 1930s: "Cultural radicals, riding a wave of revolutionary iconoclasm, called for the complete elimination of 'bourgeois' behavioral standards, traditional institutions such as the family, and Russian art and literary classics. Yet by the mid-1930s, Soviet leaders endorsed conventional norms, patriarchal families, and respect for authority. They also promoted elements of traditional culture, including folklore, Russian literary classics, and tsarist patriotic heroes."²⁸ This helps us contextualize the shift in the 1930s both to acceptance of certain aspects of "bourgeois" family life (with the attendant attitudes towards women's place in the home, expectations of living standards and material comfort) and also socialist realism when it came in 1934: "The family, previously suspected of perpetuating bourgeois beliefs, could now be trusted to promote socialism among children. Monumentalist art and architecture, formerly instruments of the old order, now helped to legitimate the new socialist order and symbolized its accomplishments."²⁹

Indeed it did; and so did the best Soviet music of those years, exemplified by Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony of 1937. But there is another angle to becoming *kul'turniy* in these years, and that is in a citizen's demonstrable knowledge of culture – especially culture of the past. The popular magazine *Ogonëk* ran a monthly questionnaire in 1936 entitled "Are You a Cultured Person?" to encourage readers to measure their own *kul'turnost'*. One, for example, asked its readers whether they could recite a Pushkin poem by heart, describe the plots of Shakespeare's plays and inquires whether they have read key texts by Stendhal and Turgenev, while also demanding familiarity with mathematics, geography, and the classics of Marxism-Leninism.³⁰ This encyclopedic appropriation of world culture is, of course, entirely of a piece with the whole "Stalinist Enlightenment" project; the gradual replacement of icons of Western past culture (with the exception of Shakespeare and a few other cultural giants who were successfully "appropriated") with those of the Russian past

²⁸ Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*, 1.

²⁹ Ibid., 4.

³⁰ David-Fox, *Crossing Borders*, 64 and Kelly and Shepherd, *Constructing Russian Culture*, 301.

was also part of the systemic shift towards Russian nationalism towards the end of the 1930s and during the post-war 1940s.³¹ Being *kul'turniy* in the mid-1930s was to be educated, hard-working, successful and positive in outlook – to be “clean, sober and efficient” – and (in this ideal world-view) their reward would be recognition within work and perhaps also Party structures, subsequent material improvement, added status and the personal pleasure of feeling oneself improved and successful.³² Therefore, we might be open to the possibility that a person would feel genuine pride and pleasure when, having been given the opportunity to appreciate art music – perhaps the first in their family to have received such a privilege – they find they are able to truly enjoy it. And, by extension, we might also consider the notion that a composer of Shostakovich's stature sincerely wished for this music-loving constituency to enjoy his music; and that he crafted a style that was both congenial to him and intended to be widely enjoyed and understood by his compatriots.

As every historian of Soviet culture knows, this return to “bourgeois” values in the 1930s was seen by some non-Soviet observers as, to coin Nicholas Timasheff's phrase, a “Great Retreat”.³³ And this, perhaps, is in part the source of those still rather vague notions that the culture produced during the period of High Stalinism was also in some way old-fashioned and anachronistic – a return to realistic portrait and landscape painting, classical architecture and easy-to-follow music and literature. Yet historians of Soviet culture have long been contesting Timasheff's view that Stalinism abandoned modernity, arguing that, on the contrary, the mass collectivization and industrialization projects of the 1930s and 40s represent a quintessentially modernizing impulse. As David Hoffmann argued as far back as 2003, “Modernity is often defined as the rise of liberal democracy and industrial capitalism, but such a definition excludes the Soviet Union and other illiberal states, such as Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. I define modernist instead in terms of two features common to all modern political systems – social interventionism and mass politics.... Stalinist culture was a particular Soviet incarnation of modern mass culture.”³⁴

If becoming *kul'turniy* was a part and parcel of becoming a modern Soviet citizen – leaving behind supposedly antiquated notions of individual freedom and subjectivity that, under both Leninism and Stalinism, were ridiculed as nineteenth-century relics – then there was nothing inherently “unmodern” about either facilitating Soviet citizens' access to high culture of the past, or expecting composers to write music that was equally accessible. And here we might expand the transactional model of the middlebrow to embrace a very broad stylistic trend. Although the traditional view of Stalin-era music from the mid-1930s is that it was inherently anachronistic, this assumption rests on notions of cultural progress that are ripe for questioning. Indeed, might this demand for comprehensibility not be seen as a

³¹ For a discussion of this “enlightenment” period, see Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, and Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome. Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

³² For a discussion of how political elites were rewarded with material wealth, see Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 223-33.

³³ Nicholas Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia*, New York: Dutton and Co., 1946.

³⁴ David Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*, 7 and 10.

radical switch away from what was, far from being modern, in fact a nineteenth-century expectation of Romantic subjectivity: the artist as serving only the Muse, and not the audience? Or of Art as lofty, searing Experience, not as (shudder) Entertainment? And is it not only the past Western European and North American privileging of Adorno's neo-Hegelian narrative of progress that have led us to struggle so profoundly with this body of repertoire, composed specifically for contemporary Soviet audiences, intended for their consolation, spiritual nourishment and – yes -- enjoyment?

I am moving irrevocably now towards a position of arguing that Stalinist musical culture was both middlebrow in a transactional *and* in a stylistic sense – and also arguing that the Soviet middlebrow style was, on its own terms, modern. In taking up this position, though, I am not claiming that this music was modern in the “expansionist” sense espoused by J. P. E. Harper-Scott in his study of Elgar; nor am I mooted the idea that we can patronize this repertoire with notions of a modernity obliquely earned; for example, by interacting with and influencing established modernisms outside the Soviet context.³⁵ That would be to adhere to a single notion of what modern means, and a single notion of its supposed value, both of them inherently Western European. What I am saying is actually something more akin to Frolova-Walker's contention on behalf of socialist realism: which is that it was a style deliberately forged as an alternative to Western European musical modernism, and that it is only residual cold war prejudice which prevents us from accepting that as unproblematic. Though Frolova-Walker somewhat has it both ways in positing this argument (she has already only selected works she considers to be relatively weak in her canon of socialist realism, so in reality the most important value judgement has already been made), her refusal to offer special pleading on behalf of the repertoire she labels socialist realist acknowledges a vital fact: this was a process in which every Soviet composer participated, in the full knowledge that they were creating a distinctive body of work that fulfilled a social function quite unlike that outside the Soviet Union. This is not the same as saying that all Soviet composers joined forces to be un-modern; there are countless stylistic parallels between their music and that of their Western peers which make many Soviet symphonies at least as up-to-date as any contemporary orchestral work by Arthur Honegger or Paul Hindemith. What Soviet composers did, in the 1930s and 40s, was knowingly and deliberately write music for a wide audience, in full knowledge that this was not the traditional European way, and, I would contend, in full acceptance that it was their duty as Soviet citizens to do so. Pressures upon them in both those decades resulted not from the absence of this fundamental aim – no Soviet composer in the 1930s set out to be unpopular, and even quite modernistic work was intended to please and entertain - but rather from unpredictable shifts in cultural policy and ideas about what was appropriately “popular”. So Frolova-Walker is right in that the aim was to forge a new tradition that was not “modern” in the European sense of privileging stylistic innovation with its attendant alienation from the listener a veritable badge of honor. She, understandably, does not wish to claim all this music under the banner of socialist realism; nor do I (though for different reasons) – I do, however, suggest that we understand it as a unique form of Soviet middlebrow.

³⁵ J. P. E. Harper-Scott, *Edward Elgar, Modernist*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

High, middle and low

Historians of Soviet culture have perhaps underestimated the extent to which musicians in particular were both aware of, and in fact openly discussed, the different cultural strata within music. For example, David-Fox argues that “the very division of culture into high and low, elite and popular, was anathema to Soviet conceptions. Indeed, the terms mass culture and popular culture were never used.... Such formulations as *kul’turno-massovaya rabota* (cultural mass-work) simply referred to enlightenment work on a large scale.”³⁶ Yet this is disingenuous: he is right that no one ever spoke of *popularnaya muzika*, but they certainly did speak of the *lëgkie zhanri* (light genres), of jazz, “gypsy romances” and of imported Western dance crazes like the foxtrot and tango as well as “everyday music” (*bitovaya muzika*), circus music, the music of *estrada* and “muzik-kholl” [music-hall] and even “street music” (*ulichnaya muzika*). All these sub-genres may not have been grouped together under the familiar Anglophone term “popular music”, but that is what they were, and they were universally recognized as such. Popular songs, both Russian and Western in origin, flooded into the Soviet Union through film, radio and theatre, and were eagerly picked up and reproduced by precisely those workers who were being culturally empowered through access to instruments, choirs, radio and clubs in which to spend their leisure time.³⁷ The Soviet Union had its own highly popular jazz entertainers in the 1930s, the best-known being Aleksandr Tsfasman and Leonid Utësev, whose songs were widely known and sung (Shostakovich collaborated with Utësev on his music-hall spectacle *Declared Dead*). Light music of all kinds was so popular, in fact, that in the late 1920s up to 1932, the militant proletarian faction in Soviet musical life did everything they could to close off every avenue of what they did not quite call (though evidently meant) “lowbrow” musical entertainment.³⁸ Even after 1932, popular songs remained cornerstones of Soviet musical life; the most successful songwriters of the 1930s, such as Isaak Dunaevsky, Matvey Blanter and Vassily Solovëv-Sedoy, were fully accepted and rewarded by the State for their work, but – crucially - it was never suggested that their music was on the same level as that written by major Soviet composers. The distinction between “high” and “low” was manifestly present in the minds of musicians in these years. Shostakovich himself used the term “high art” in his 1931 article for the paper *Rabochii i teatr* “Declaration of a Composer’s Duties”, in which he dismissed the value of all his incidental and film scores written over the last few years, and selects only two of his works (his opera *The Nose* and his Third Symphony) as deserving of “a place in the development of Soviet music” and which

³⁶ David-Fox, *Crossing Borders*, 66.

³⁷ Stephen Lovell points out that most workers would have listened to the radio only in the clubs, since in the 1920s and 30s they were not affordable except to richer citizens. Stephen Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age. A History of Soviet Radio, 1919-1970*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 51 and 64. Sheila Fitzpatrick cites a survey carried out in 1938 that established that twenty-four per cent of workers said they owned a radio (Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 223).

³⁸ See Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses* for details of the 1929 All-Russian Music Conference complaints about “gypsy concerts, decadent singing and dance” (78). For the resolution passed at this conference, see Semën Korev, ed., *Nash muzikal’nyy front: materiali vserossiiskoy muzikal’noy konferentsii* [Our musical front: materials from the All-Russian Music Conference], Moscow: 1930, 250-52.

can lay full claim to be “high art” (*visokoe iskusstvo*).³⁹ By extension, therefore, the music he was dismissing was not “high art” at all, but a less satisfactory – indeed, a compromised, art. Perhaps not “low”, exactly, but not “high” either.

As Frolova-Walker has shown, Stalin himself made the same distinction when he dismissed the idea of admitting balalaika music for the first Stalin Prize. The composer Tikhon Khrennikov told the story in his memoirs thus: “Stalin dismissed all non-classical art as mere fairground amusements ... [and] said that the balalaika is not a real musical instrument at all, and that the balalaika player shouldn’t be granted any award, since that would debase the prize itself.”⁴⁰ So at least by 1941, the very outer limit of my chronology here, in contrast to what David-Fox claims, the concept of “high art” in musical terms at least was alive and well in Stalin’s Russia. And by definition, so was its lowlier counterpart, which in 1931 had been the favourite punch-bag of zealous proletarian musicians keen to rid the factory clubs of this distractingly enjoyable ideological menace.⁴¹ So then “middlebrow”, despite its Anglophone origin, is neither a tautologous nor an anachronistic term when applied to Soviet culture: it signifies art music as opposed to popular, or light music, and, because “art for art’s sake” was denounced as elite formalism during the period of High Stalinism (becoming an extremely toxic charge in the music world after the attacks on Shostakovich in January 1936), Soviet art music in this period by definition meant music that was understood to be “high art”, lofty in intent – ideally improving, able to direct a listener’s thoughts in ideologically appropriate directions, even - but not avant-garde, not difficult to understand and therefore not “highbrow”, but “middlebrow” by definition.

Socialist Realism and the symphony

Perhaps the ultimate middlebrow symphony of the 1930s is Shostakovich’s Fifth – a work that may or may not be socialist realist, but which, in its global popularity, amply merits the “middlebrow” description. The more urgent question is whether or not the Fifth Symphony was understood to be socialist realist at the time it was being canonized in Soviet repertoire; if it was, then we have a clear indication of what socialist realism in the symphony was perceived to be, not only by Shostakovich but also by Soviet musicians more broadly. If it was not, then the importance of the concept itself must be questioned; for if a work did not, in fact, need to be socialist realist - or deemed as such – in order to succeed, then it may be that we no longer need to use the term at all. To begin with, we need to remind ourselves what the literal definition of socialist realism was when it was formally announced at the 1934 Writers’ Congress. Both here, and in later key writings, socialist realism was described as a literary method with three underpinning criteria: *narodnost’* (having the quality of being “for or of the People”), *ideynost’* (possessing ideological content), and *partiyност’*

³⁹ Dmitry Shostakovich, “Deklaratsiya obiazanostey kompozitora”, *Rabochii i teatr*, November 1931, 6.

⁴⁰ Frolova-Walker, *Stalin’s Music Prize: Soviet Culture and Politics*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016, 27-28.

⁴¹ The Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians gained control of music publishing and managed to almost completely ban the printing of “light genre” music. See Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 192.

(possessing party-mindedness).⁴² Clearly, no untexted symphony could hope to fulfil anything other than the first category; but its application under Stalin was not so literal that it could not be attached to works that manifestly did not have such qualities.

Laurel Fay has meticulously traced the process by which the full “subtitle” of the symphony – “A Soviet Artist’s Creative Response to Just Criticism” and the official interpretation (“the formation of a personality”) -- came to accrue around the work, which was originally premiered with nothing more than the blandest of program notes to accompany it.⁴³ In sum, a month after the premiere, Evgeny Mravinsky, the conductor who had premiered it, led a Composers’ Union discussion in Leningrad on the work, and the prominent Soviet writer Aleksey Tolstoy published a review of it in *Izvestiya* in which he ventured the opinion that the work was about the “formation of a personality” (*stanovlenie lichnosti*). Shostakovich himself (who knew Tolstoy well and had very recently collaborated with him on their ill-fated opera project *Orango*) then went into print several times to approve this reading and echo those very words. By the time of the Moscow premiere on 29 January 1938, the subtitle “Moy tvorcheskii otvet” [My Creative Answer] had appeared in the program – the title of his 25 January *Vechnyaya Moskva* article a few days earlier.⁴⁴ Over the coming months and years, this interpretation became enshrined in Soviet musicology: the symphony was at least partly autobiographical and traced Shostakovich’s spiritual (in a Soviet sense) growth towards his final rejection of individualism and struggle for joy in collective triumph. In the words of the conductor of the Moscow premiere, Aleksandr Gauk, it was “the first symphonic work to show the formation of the Soviet person, the fate of our intelligentsia.”⁴⁵ Writing for the arts journal *Literaturnaya gazeta*, Shostakovich claimed that he wished “to show in the symphony how through a series of tragic conflicts, and through great internal struggles, ‘optimism as a world-view’ could triumph.”⁴⁶ The Fifth’s success and canonization was won thanks to a combination of its innate qualities and the skills of those who knew how to frame and interpret it in such a way that its acclaim could be justified in ideological terms. Tolstoy’s reading gave the symphony its trajectory and its rationale in language that explicitly referenced socialist realism. And through branding his symphony an “answer” to the criticism he had received in *Pravda* and elsewhere, Shostakovich positioned himself as the grateful recipient of official guidance – and, crucially, did so by writing not a trite, inoffensive, or dreary apology of a symphony, but a work widely considered a masterpiece, both then and now.

Tolstoy had stuck his neck out for Shostakovich in his *Izvestiya* review by hailing the Fifth Symphony directly as socialist realist, but music writers were far more cautious. Georgiy Khubov’s review of the symphony, published in *Sovetskaya muzika* in March 1938, circumvents the question of whether it was or was not socialist realist by concluding his

⁴² For a comprehensive English-language account of the Congress, see H. G. Scott, *Problems of Soviet Literature*, Moscow: Co-operative Publishing Society, 1935.

⁴³ Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 104-05.

⁴⁴ Shostakovich’s own articles about the symphony appeared in *Vechnyaya Moskva* 25 January 1938 and in *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 20 January 1938.

⁴⁵ Aleksandr Vasilievich Gauk, *Memuari. Izbrannii stat’i. Vospominaniya sovremennikov*, Moscow: Sovetskiy Kompozitor, 1975, 130.

⁴⁶ Shostakovich, *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 20 January 1938.

review with the judgement that, when Shostakovich has finally solved the problem of *narodnost* in his music, his music will become fully successful and able to resolve all the problems set by the “tragic” questions of the Fifth Symphony. But, says Khubov, Shostakovich will be able to solve this problem because he is “a great, genuine, Soviet artist.”⁴⁷ Thus, despite some fairly major criticisms, Khubov felt confident enough to anoint Shostakovich, if not quite the symphony, “Soviet”, but he felt no obligation to label the symphony “socialist realist.” Neither did Shostakovich use this term in his own writings about his symphony; and nor did the term appear in any program note in those years. Tolstoy was, in fact, the only one to link the symphony with socialist realism in the period immediately after the premiere.

Some (not all) later Soviet-era writers on Shostakovich did invoke socialist realism explicitly in relation to the Fifth Symphony: Genrikh Orlov’s 1966 survey of Russian and Soviet symphonism states firmly that “we may rank Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony in first place as the embodiment of the principles of socialist realism in the Soviet symphony.”⁴⁸ But a study of Soviet symphonism published only a year later, and edited by the Leningrad musicologist Andrey Kriukov (author of sensitive studies of musical life during the blockade), did not mention socialist realism at all in connection with the symphony. The author of the section on Shostakovich, despite re-hashing the official narrative, adds a reference to the Largo as expressing the troubled atmosphere just before the war – a veiled reference to the devastating repressions taking place at the time of the symphony’s premiere.⁴⁹ Already by 1967, then, we see certain writers reluctant to anoint a work they considered a masterpiece with a label they probably felt was an embarrassment to the composer. The publication date of both Orlov’s and Kriukov’s books (1966 and 1967 respectively) places their comments in the uncertain context of Brezhnev’s “stagnation” coming very soon after Khrushchëv’s ousting by more hard-line elements in the Communist Party; and by that time the Soviet musical landscape had changed so completely that Shostakovich himself – now powerful, wealthy and a Communist Party member – was writing music so far removed from what might have been expected of socialist realism that we can consider the doctrine effectively defunct.

Even if we acknowledge that there was not a unified Soviet claim that the Fifth Symphony was socialist realist in the post-Stalin era, the late 1930s was still the period when Shostakovich most urgently needed to secure his position. If his contemporaries did not claim the symphony for socialist realism at the very time when we might assume it would do the composer the most good, then how sure can we be that, in 1937, any musician thought it merited that label? Was it rather the case that the symphony was heard as recognizably “Soviet” through its finale, and acknowledged to be exceptionally high-quality, and that that

⁴⁷ Georgiy Khubov, “Pyataya simfoniya Shostakovicha”, *Sovetskaya muzika* 1938/3, 14, 27-28. See Richard Taruskin, “Public Lies and Unspeakable Truth: Interpreting the Fifth Symphony” in Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997, 511-44, for a helpful discussion of the Fifth’s contemporary reception.

⁴⁸ Genrikh Orlov, *Russkii Sovetskii simfonizm*, 1996, 138.

⁴⁹ T. Todorova, “Pyat’ simfonii Shostakovicha”, in Andrey N. Kriukov, ed., *Sovetskaya simfoniya zo 50 let*, Leningrad: 1967, 443.

was enough? Did anyone, in fact, seriously claim that any symphony was socialist realist in the 1930s, or did successful works acquire that appellation only much later, once they were safely canonized? Or was the overriding consideration not even how “Soviet” it sounded (for instance, whether or not it had a celebratory ending), but rather its comprehensibility? In other words, was the all-important factor clarity of language and style: perhaps even how “middlebrow” it was?

Musicians and critics did use the term socialist realism in the 1930s, but they did so remarkably sparingly. To be sure, there was a whole article devoted to it, in the first issue of the new journal *Sovetskaya muzika* in January 1933 – a year before the Writers’ Congress at which socialist realism was advanced as the new “guiding principle” of Soviet cultural endeavor.⁵⁰ Its author was the musicologist Viktor Gorodinsky, a heavyweight music editor who had been a communist party member since 1918 and might have been expected to take a strong line, urging Soviet composers to apply themselves to this new doctrine. But in fact his piece was no more than empty exhortation, never dealing with the actual works themselves and deciding which might be socialist realist; indeed, he fails to mention a single Soviet symphony. Even the then-Union chairman Nikolay Chelyapov’s article “On the question of the path for Soviet music” in the May issue that year neglects to discuss socialist realism in relation to any existing music. Chelyapov rather takes as his starting-point the assumption that there is no identifiably socialist realist music yet composed, so concentrates instead on listing potential models from the great “realists” of the past (Schubert, Musorgsky) and concludes by urging Soviet composers to turn away from “individualism” to the collective and forge a new “monumentalist” style.⁵¹

In the absence of identifiable models, then, did anyone really worry much about what a socialist realist symphony should sound like? Let us go back to the discussions about Soviet symphonism, held in Moscow in February 1935 and partially printed from stenographic reports in *Sovetskaya muzika* that year. Here, in this interim “internationalist” period between 1932 and the start of the repressions in 1936, where Schoenberg was still played in the Leningrad Philharmonia Great Hall, and Shostakovich had not yet been dealt the blow that was to hit him the following January, we can find some frank opinions being voiced on what kind of work might be suitable for what would be the Soviet symphonic canon. It is clear from the discussions that no one wished to put forward any existing work as a model; it was much easier to point out general deficiencies than to pick any one symphony and champion its cause. To this end, symphonies of the years immediately preceding the conference that might strike us today as eminently suitable for canonization, such as Myaskovsky’s Twelfth Symphony (“The Collective Farm”) and Lev Knipper’s Fourth (“Poem about the Komsomol Fighter”) found themselves on the receiving end of sharp criticism rather than praise. Myaskovsky’s own former student, Dmitry Kabalevsky, offered the opinion that Myaskovsky’s Twelfth Symphony was a less successful work than his Sixth, and

⁵⁰ V. M. Gorodinsky, “K voprosu o sotsialist realizme v muzike, *Sovetskaya muzika* 1933/1, 6-18.

⁵¹ Nikolay Chelyapov, “K voprosu o puti sovetskoy muziki”, *Sovetskaya muzika* 1933/5, 30.

even “lacks genuine artistic merit.”⁵² Shostakovich roundly condemned Knipper’s latest symphonies in some of the harshest terms used by anyone at the conference:

Perhaps Comrade Rīzhkin, who rightly pointed out that I used “criminal music” (*blatnaya muzika*) in my ballet *The Bolt*, should say the same about Knipper’s symphonies, because there the question of purity and clarity of language is especially urgent. I myself find no such purity or clarity in these symphonies. On the contrary, these works exhibit a chewed-up language and, I would say, a hard-currency [*torgsinovskaya*] sound... the music is poverty-stricken and primitive.”⁵³

The insult “*torgsinovskaya*” was a particularly low blow: “Torgsin” was a Soviet acronym for stores where higher quality products were on sale only to foreigners and privileged Soviet citizens to buy in currency other than the ruble in order to bolster the Soviet economy with a reliable source of foreign currency. The shops were frequented by black-marketeers eager to fleece their fellow citizens by selling on goods at even more inflated prices and the shops were also associated with prostitution (women exchanging sex for goods).⁵⁴ Thus Shostakovich’s epithet effectively connects Knipper’s music with greed, exploitation and depravity. That he felt able to do so in such a public setting – and was not reprimanded by any other delegate – speaks volumes about the comparative freedom of the event as well as about Shostakovich’s own views on the high calling of a symphonic composer. As far as he was concerned, there were to be no cheap short-cuts to composing symphonies in a populist style. But his was not the only voice raised against Knipper: Khubov declared that the best thing about his Fourth Symphony was the partisan song (that is, “Polyushko-pole”, a catchy popular song about the civil war), rather unkindly joking that “without this song, the symphony would lose 90% of its value.”⁵⁵ The two most promising candidates for representing the Soviet symphony in what we would now consider its most socialist realist incarnation were written off by some of the most influential people at the conference as duds, and no others were suggested in their place. On the basis of this evidence, it is tempting to conclude that composers simply did not take the concept of socialist realism seriously – and no wonder, given its specifically literary origins. But what they unquestionably did take seriously was both the quality and the accessibility of symphonic music, and the conference transcripts show overwhelmingly that music considered poor quality, no matter how ideologically committed it was, was negatively evaluated. Obviously no one used the term “middlebrow”, because it did not exist in Soviet critical parlance, but the term’s connotations of popularity and ease of comprehension are constantly in the background to these discussions.

Opportunities for relatively frank and open exchange were shortly to become a thing of the past in Soviet musical life. Following *Pravda*’s attack on Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth* on 26 January 1936, and the follow-up piece on his ballet *The Limpid Stream* on 6 February, the Composers’ Union branches in both Leningrad and Moscow held further discussions,

⁵² *Sovetskaya muzika* 1935/5, 39.

⁵³ *Sovetskaya muzika* 1935/5, 32.

⁵⁴ For a description of the Torgsin network, see Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 228.

⁵⁵ *Sovetskaya muzika* 1935/6, 36.

also partially printed in *Sovetskaya muzika*. Though the discussions in the two branches ran quite differently, overall both give a quite different impression to the freer forum of the previous year. The 1935 discussions could be savage in their criticism, and none was more so than Shostakovich, but they were also humorous in places, and writers and composers felt free to voice admiration for Western figures such as Schoenberg and Krenek, then still being freely performed in the Leningrad schedules. Now, in 1936, no one would have dared to voice any support for a contemporary Western composer. Chelyapov (soon to be purged and shot) wrote the opening piece, in which he, like everyone else, genuflected before the *Pravda* editorial and declared that “the fundamental slogan of soviet art is that of socialist realism.”⁵⁶ Underlining the future direction of classical adaptation, he listed Vivaldi, Bach, Handel and Haydn as the composers for whom “folk creativity” (*narodnoe tvorchestvo*) was a fundamental basis, and he further listed Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakov, Musorgsky, Borodin and Tchaikovsky as the best representatives of Russian culture who drew on their folk heritage. The bogeymen now were the “formalists”, the purveyors of atonal and futurist music, and accordingly all Western contemporary music was instantly wiped from the Philharmonia schedules. All the delegates at the conference – with the sole exception of the composer Vladimir Shcherbachëv – voiced their agreement with the judgement of *Pravda* on Shostakovich and all present clearly understood that the role in Soviet musical life played by their Western contemporaries was, at least for the time being, conclusively over.

It may be idle to harp on the fact that hardly anyone at the conference, even at this critical moment, had anything to say about socialist realism. One reason for its neglect is obvious enough: this was a discussion focused almost entirely on what not to do and what not to approve of. “Formalism” was the ultimate cultural crime and worshipping the West was judged to be a major cause. It was not the place to identify paragons of virtue; Shostakovich’s fall was a very clear signal that the saints of today could be the sinners of tomorrow, though it is worth noting the voices raised in defence of Myaskovsky, specifically, defending him against Sollertinsky’s alleged disdain for “Myaskovshchina” – a term apparently used as a watchword for all that was dull and provincial in Soviet musical life. It left Soviet composers casting around for the new type of Soviet symphonism that just the previous year had been the topic of fairly vague discussion. Now finding the right formula had become extremely urgent; and as is now well known, the next offering from Shostakovich would be rejected even before it could be premiered. Shostakovich had almost completed his Fourth Symphony at the time of these discussions, and he was confident enough in its powers to submit it for rehearsal, fully expecting the premiere to take place in December 1936. The fate of the symphony is well known – Shostakovich was pressured into withdrawing it and it was not played again until 1961 – and it shows that those in official positions around Shostakovich and the Leningrad Philharmonia at that time (Platon Kerzhentsev, the Chair of the Committee on Arts Affairs, Vladimir Iokhel’son from the

⁵⁶ *Sovetskaya muzika* 1936/3, 5.

Composers' Union Leningrad branch and Iosif Rîzhkin, Director of the Philharmonia) felt the "formula" had evaded him.⁵⁷

Role-models and canons

So if Shostakovich got the formula wrong with his Fourth Symphony, did anyone else get it right? Apparently so: Myaskovsky's Sixteenth Symphony was premiered on 24 October 1936 by the Moscow Philharmonia, conducted by Eugen Szenkar. As with Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, the premiere of this new work was accompanied by articles in the arts press explaining the "meaning" of the symphony and providing an ideologically sound platform for the symphony's reception. Already in June 1936, Myaskovsky had published his "Autobiographical Notes" in *Sovetskaya muzika*, in which, with typical self-deprecation, he claimed that in his Sixteenth Symphony he had not managed to fully solve the problem of either form or language but he did address a contemporary theme within it (that is, Soviet aviation; the finale was based on his own popular song "Planes are Flying" and the slow movement was a memorial to the tragic deaths of airmen and passengers in the *Maxim Gorky* crash in 1935, which killed thirty-five people).⁵⁸ Frolova-Walker notes that this symphony was considered the "first masterpiece of Socialist Realist music", and indeed critical response was generous, to say the least.⁵⁹ In January 1937 Khubov published a glowing review of the work, which he praised for the "depth and complexity of [its] great philosophical significance, combined with such wise simplicity and clarity of expression", though he stopped short of anointing it as literally socialist realist.⁶⁰ In the same issue of *Sovetskaya muzika* Viktor Vinogradov published a short piece on Myaskovsky's recent song "Ot vsey dushi" [With all my heart] on words by the Kazakh bard Dzhabbul Dzhabayev in which he goes so far as to claim that it met the requirement to be "national in form, socialist in content" – but since this was a song rather than a symphony, and set a text by one of the most notorious Stalinist poets of the period, this was an eminently feasible achievement.⁶¹ The symphony, by contrast, had no text or even a program, though its stylistic reference to folk song and actual Soviet song gave it a clearly implied program of sorts, and one that was appropriately heroic in character. No surprise, then, that the symphony was well received in the press; ground had been thoroughly prepared by the composer himself, in making his semi-programmatic intentions clear, and in setting Dzhabbul's slavish ode to Stalin he had firmly positioned himself as eager to fulfil his ideological obligations. Moreover, Shostakovich's fall from grace had left a gaping hole in the record of Soviet musical achievements that the entire bureaucratic edifice of both Composers' Unions and the Committee on Arts Affairs now rushed to fill. Myaskovsky's Sixteenth Symphony provided what had been lacking – a high-quality symphonic work that embodied socialist realist

⁵⁷ For a detailed history of the Fourth Symphony, see Pauline Fairclough, *A Soviet Credo: Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2006.

⁵⁸ Nikolay Myaskovsky, "Avtobiograficheskie zametki o tvorchestvom puti" [Autobiographical notes on my creative path], *Sovetskaya muzika* 1936/6, 10-11.

⁵⁹ Frolova Walker, "The Glib", 10.

⁶⁰ Georgiy Khubov, "16-aya simfoniya Myaskovskogo", *Sovetskaya muzika* 1937/1, 30.

⁶¹ Viktor Vinogradov, "O pesne 'Ot vsey dushi' Myaskovskogo", *Sovetskaya muzika* 1937/1, 34.

precepts: a folk-like and popular mass quality (the slow movement and the song used for the finale); a public statement aligning the music with a contemporary event in Soviet life (the plane crash), and a popular song used as the basis for an uplifting, optimistic finale. Yet even as they united to praise it, Soviet critics hesitated to fully anoint the work as socialist realist – perhaps because the term was not yet properly established in Soviet music criticism, perhaps because critics were conscious that the concept itself was not really transferable to symphonic music. In reality, it was these narratives around musical works that formed the real basis of their acceptance, because no one could demonstrate that a symphony was literally socialist realist.

In designating Myaskovsky's Sixteenth as the embodiment of socialist realism in a post-Soviet critical context, Frolova-Walker has created a dual narrative around the work: first, reminding us that it was successful and uncontroversial; but second, taking its very ordinariness and harnessing this quality to socialist realism as an explicit and defining quality. In short, Myaskovsky's Sixteenth and its success has been used as hard evidence for what we should consider to be symphonic socialist realism. Yet if, to take the title of Frolova-Walker's chapter, socialist realism was indeed glib, bland and corny, then this does, as I argued at the outset, still leave us with a problem when looking at Shostakovich's Fifth, which, on the current evidence, should not have enjoyed anything like the success of Myaskovsky's more obliging Sixteenth Symphony. So, then, let us see which of the two works was embraced most warmly by orchestras – not forgetting that both Moscow and Leningrad Philharmonias were then going through eviscerating purges, and should have been at their most risk-averse?⁶²

For an orchestra like the Moscow or Leningrad Philharmonia to give multiple repeat performances of a symphony, it was essential for them to have substantial levels of confidence in it. If we consider that Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony had already received three Leningrad performances *before* his article in *Literaturnaya gazeta* appeared (20 January 1938), with the fourth already scheduled for the following week – and that Khubov's half-hearted endorsement of the symphony would not appear in *Sovetskaya muzika* until March that year (following the Composers' Union discussions on 8 February 1938) – the Fifth Symphony was well on its way to canonization before any of the press around it began to weave its socialist realist narratives. Table 1 shows performance of the Fifth Symphony between its November 1937 premiere and January 1941 in the Leningrad and Moscow Philharmonia seasons, showing the combined performance tally of both orchestras as twenty-one or twenty-two:

Table 1. Performances of Shostakovich Symphony No. 5, 1937-41, Leningrad and Moscow Philharmonias

Leningrad

21/11/37	Premiere, with Khachaturyan Piano Concerto, Asaf'yev extract from <i>Flames of Paris</i>
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⁶² For details of the Moscow Philharmonia purge, see Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, 141-53.

1/1/38	With Red Army dances in second half
20/1/38	With Haydn Symphony No. 6 (Hob. 1/6)
28/1/38	(concert for art workers of Leningrad) with Wagner, <i>Meistersinger</i> overture, Chopin F minor Piano Concerto
11/3/38	With Haydn Symphony No. 1 (Hob. 1/1)
5/4/38	Repeat of 11/3/38
2/1/41	With Shostakovich Piano Quintet

Moscow

29/1/38	Moscow premiere, with Haydn Symphony in G major (number unknown) and Beethoven <i>Adelaide</i>
2/2/38	Repeat of 2/2/38
1/3/38	With Brahms Violin Concerto and Mozart overture to <i>Marriage of Figaro</i>)
4/3/38	With Haydn Symphony No. 100 (Hob. 1/100)
11/4/38	With Glinka, <i>Capriccio on Russian Themes</i> and arias from <i>Ivan Susanin</i> and Glazunov Violin Concerto
23/4/38	Myaskovsky, Symphony No. 18 and Khachaturyan Piano Concerto*
1/10/38	With Tchaikovsky, <i>Francesca da Rimini</i> , Mozart, overture to <i>Die Schauspieldirektor</i> , Shebalin Symphony No. 3, Khachaturyan Piano Concerto)
14/11/38	With Golubev Symphony No. 2 and Khachaturyan Piano Concerto)
27, 28/12/38	With Bach B Minor Suite and Rimsky-Korsakov, excerpts from <i>The Invisible City of Kitezh</i>
23/4/39	With Riazov, Flute Concerto, Kreitner, Andante and scherzo for piano and orchestra, Tikotsky, excerpts from <i>Mikhas Podgorniy</i>
26/11/39	In dekada, with Vlasov, Second Suite from <i>Ay-churek</i> , Fel'dman Violin Concerto
6/1/40	With Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No. 2 and Tchaikovsky overture to <i>Hamlet</i>
20/3/40	With Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 4 and <i>Coriolanus</i> overture
1/4/40	with Shostakovich Piano Concerto No. 1 and Symphony No. 1)

How did Myaskovsky's Sixteenth Symphony fare by comparison? The same orchestras performed it, but in Moscow, where it received four performances, these occurred almost exclusively within the premiere season 1936-37 (performance dates: 24 October, 29 November, 8 December and 21 January; one further performance on 15 January 1938), while in Leningrad it was played only once (26 November 1939) – so a total of six in the

same period. This was already exceptional for any Soviet symphony; most received one or two performances and no more. Khubov's report of the Myaskovsky symphony was vastly more complimentary than his piece on Shostakovich's Fifth, and Myaskovsky had won further praise for his Dzambul setting; but none of this verbal approval translated into the coveted multiple performances given to Shostakovich.

Therefore, it is clear that canonization was not dependent upon a work's socialist realist credentials. Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony was established in the repertoire before those credentials could even be established; the process of its acceptance in Soviet criticism began only after it had been played four times: in a *dekada* (the premiere), in a special concert for Leningrad party activists that included Red Army dances in the second half and in a further Art Workers' Union concert, as well as in a late-January pairing with Haydn. For the second concert (the one including the Red Army Ensemble), the Leningrad Philharmonia devised a questionnaire to be distributed inside programs. Sadly, for our purposes, the results were not preserved, but the questionnaire ran as follows: 1. What symphonic works do you already know? 2. Did you already know any of Shostakovich's music? (List works you have heard and your impressions of them) 3. What is your opinion of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony? Clearly, the orchestra was amassing popular opinion about the symphony in a way that was absolutely uncharacteristic, strongly suggesting it was seeking to protect itself in the event of an official rebuke: I came across no such questionnaire for any other concert prior to that date in the Philharmonia archives. All that is left of this mass-questionnaire technique is a set of responses to a Philharmonia summer concert in Kislovodsk in 1938, and these show – albeit to a very modest degree – that Shostakovich's Fifth was popular with audiences. A sixteen-year-old student from Leningrad, E. Vigodskaya, wrote that of all the concerts she attended (that is, in the summer tour of the Philharmonia in Kislovodsk that year), the Fifth Symphony made “the most powerful impression” on her, while a fifty-five year old literature teacher from Moscow, Moisey Heifetz, recorded that for him, too, the Fifth Symphony made the strongest impression on him of all the concerts he attended, because of its “power and richness of unusual instrumentation, as well as its freshness and novelty.” A forty-six year old teacher, F. Murav'yev, also liked the Fifth Symphony best because of the “novelty, depth and sincerity of the experiences transmitted within it.”⁶³ And this was exactly what the Philharmonia wanted to hear – they had taken the risk of championing the work, when Shostakovich's reputation still hung by a thread. Popularity with real people was all that truly mattered; no audience member was supposed to remark on how “realistic” or even “socialist” it was. They were just supposed to enjoy it; and it seems that they did – not just the Leningrad premiere audience who famously wept during the Largo, but also an audience of citizens relaxing on their summer vacation in the Black Sea, many of whom doubtless knew little or nothing about Shostakovich's career prior to attending the concert, and for whom his personal rehabilitation probably meant very little.

Socialist realist or Soviet middlebrow?

⁶³ TsGALI fond 279 (Leningrad Philharmonia), op. 1, delo 101 'Anketi 1938', ll. 65-67, 32, 113.

It would appear that no symphonic work during these formative years was wholeheartedly embraced as socialist realist; but what we do see is that the *process* of creating narratives around symphonies was of special importance at this time, and it is in that context that we see socialist realism's secondary definitions coming into play. As the Russian musicologist Igor Vorob'ev explains, the fact of socialist realism as creative method lay behind a range of ingenious strategies in the music press to construct socialist realist "pragmatic narratives" around musical works which extrapolated ideological meaning in a parallel process to their actual performance. In doing so, writers developed a wide range of verbal tropes, including standard terms such as realist, classical, heroic, simple and national and others that are not easily translatable, such as *narodniy*, *pesenniy* (having a song-like character) and *massoviy* (similar to *narodniy*, only signifying the "masses" rather than the "folk"). Any combination of one or more of these tropes, convincingly evoked in a verbal account of a musical work, could signify socialist realism without the writer actually having to use the term explicitly.⁶⁴ Writers used all these terms with considerable skill, knowing exactly what they were doing: creating a socialist realist narrative around an abstract work that could not itself fulfil the aesthetic criteria. The symphonies themselves were not socialist realist, and this was clear to contemporary writers of the late 1930s even if, following successful canonization, some musicologists later in the Soviet era felt comfortable using that designation.

Given that, how should we respond to Frolova-Walker's contention that socialist realism was, and is, a definable style that was formulated as an alternative to modernism; and that what needs to change is not the label, but our phobic reaction to it?⁶⁵ Up to a point, I am in agreement with Frolova-Walker when she observes that it is not credible to maintain that socialist realism was an enforced style; additionally, the fact that it historically coincided with an international retreat from radical avant-gardism is an incontrovertible fact. Where we differ is in maintaining the integrity of the socialist realist label itself. For Frolova-Walker, Myaskovsky's Sixteenth Symphony is socialist realist; Shostakovich's Fifth – we can only assume, since her article is concerned only with defining works composed in the classic "bland style" – is not. Yet as we have seen, of the two works, though Myaskovsky's was greeted with more enthusiasm in *Sovetskaya muzika* (and we must not forget the role of his Dzambul setting in smoothing his critical path), Shostakovich's was canonized much more swiftly and comprehensively. It is not possible, on this basis, to point to Myaskovsky and say his work was socialist realist without doing the same to Shostakovich, or we are reduced to relying on nothing but the most subjective personal criteria. Either Myaskovsky's Sixteenth and Shostakovich's Fifth were socialist realist, or neither of them were. And this is my own contention: neither met the literal criteria, because that was impossible for a symphonic work. Critics received them using a battery of secondary descriptors that *suggested* socialist realism in order to support their entry into the performance canon, and in order to show higher administrative and political bodies that the Composers' Union had recognized *Pravda's* criticism of Shostakovich from early 1936 and turned its wise words to good constructive purpose. It was in everyone's interests to canonize both symphonies and to

⁶⁴ Igor Vorob'ev, *Sotsrealisticheskiy "Bolshoy stil'" v sovetskoy muzike (1930-1950-e godi)*, St Petersburg: Kompozitor, 2013.

⁶⁵ Frolova-Walker, "The Glib", 19-21.

show that Soviet musicians were being both diligent and successful in following the new Party lines. A symphony could not *be* socialist realist; but it could gain critical acceptance when accompanied by these secondary descriptors, and so *become* effectively socialist realist by default; or at least gain the same credibility as if critics had proclaimed it a socialist realist paragon.

As Frolova-Walker herself has more recently shown, the awarding of Stalin Prizes to works that did not seem to adhere to any of those features, barring only “classicism” – yet another secondary definition – merely underlines the extent to which socialist realism was melded with other semi-official musical descriptors like “Soviet” by virtue of yet another tier of adjectives loosely associated with socialist realism such as “clarity”, “mastery”, even “genius” – all terms associated with Shostakovich’s Stalin prizewinning Piano Quintet.⁶⁶ A bad work, however hyped as socialist realist, could not be sure of gaining canonic status – as was amply proven by Ivan Dzerzhinsky’s opera *Tikhiy Don* (The Quiet Don), premiered in 1935, even praised by Stalin, yet which fell swiftly into obscurity nonetheless.⁶⁷ My point here is that we need not repeat the same claims, rehearsing all those secondary descriptors as justification for retaining the label itself. To jettison the term socialist realism is not a decision made phobically – founded on any cold war prejudice or conviction that it was a coerced style. It is simply logical. Rendering works socialist realist through music criticism was a convoluted high-pressure process that Soviet music critics were forced to participate in; we are in a much more fortunate position.

By admitting that the term socialist realism cannot be credibly applied to symphonic music, we also remove the temptation to divide Stalin-era repertoire into the categories of those that “conformed” and those that did not. And this can only be of benefit to Soviet music historiography: we can stop thinking in terms of who capitulated and who resisted; who was brave and who was weak; who betrayed their creative impulses, and who remained true to their calling. All these binaries do is prevent us from understanding deeper currents in human behavior. The Stalin regime poured vast sums into maintaining an extraordinarily active musical culture on many levels, but with that of contemporary composition featuring prominently. Composers did understand that they had a civic duty to their listeners; some, for multiple and complex reasons, never managed to find a style that accommodated both their own taste and their idea of what audiences might enjoy; others did successfully make that accommodation, and it provided them with a framework and set of expectations within which they were able to realize their talent as fully as possible. Responding to that civic duty produced what I have called the “Soviet middlebrow” style. It was a distinctive, and historically limited, phenomenon that required a unique set of cultural circumstances: an economic model that weakened the need for commercial success; an ideological model that insisted on equality of opportunity, experience and education; and a deep-seated tradition, existing long before 1917, of regarding the function of art as social transformation for the collective good. This is why the Soviet middlebrow cannot be seen as analogous to the

⁶⁶ Frolova-Walker, *Stalin’s Music Prize*, 37-62.

⁶⁷ See Frolova-Walker, “Soviet Music in Post-Soviet Musicology: The First Twenty Years and Beyond” in Frolova-Walker and Patrick Zuk, eds., *Russian Music Since 1917*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 79-80.

concept of middlebrow in Britain or the United States; these prerequisites were not dominant in either culture, so inevitably, attempts to transfer Soviet practices of cultural sharing to more class-riven societies provoked deep antagonism. Even if we put to one side the allergic response of a Clement Greenberg or Hannah Arendt to mass cultural education and consider only Adorno's perspective – rooted in Marxist theory and ostensibly concerned with social transformation – the objections he raises both to “compromised” (that is, stylistically accessible) new music and to the all-too-easy availability of the classics fall away when transferred to the Soviet context. There, Adorno's arguments are anticipated and he is beaten at his own game: for him, the “enlightening” purpose of art was conceived as a feature of a capitalist economy, as was the notion of revolution as the inevitable and desirable consequence of that enlightenment. Hence, in Adorno's world-view, any cultural practice that distracted citizens from being enlightened could only be regarded negatively, whether that was a Beethoven quartet playing in the background on the radio or Stravinsky titillating his audiences at the ballet. But in Stalin's Soviet Union culture could have no such enlightening purpose – because the “goal” of such enlightenment, as Marx and Engels had first conceived of it, had in theory already been fulfilled. Nor was access to culture a means to cynical exercises in social display, as Adorno had believed; for millions of Soviet citizens it really was a chance to experience something that brought genuine pleasure, even if a functional by-product was to foster sobriety and expectations of *kul'turniy* behavior. The philosophically muddled and self-serving conceit underpinning Western narratives on the lofty effect of “high art” on the human spirit were, in the Soviet Union, replaced by quite different notions: “high art” as having a clear duty to entertain, uplift and inform; composers as paid servants of the people, expected to perform civic duties in return for State support; a moral obligation for artists to communicate, not to turn away from their audiences. For all these reasons, the “Soviet middlebrow” was a style all of its own; it sought to be a form of mass, though “high art”, musical communication. Much of it, miraculously and wonderfully, succeeded.